7
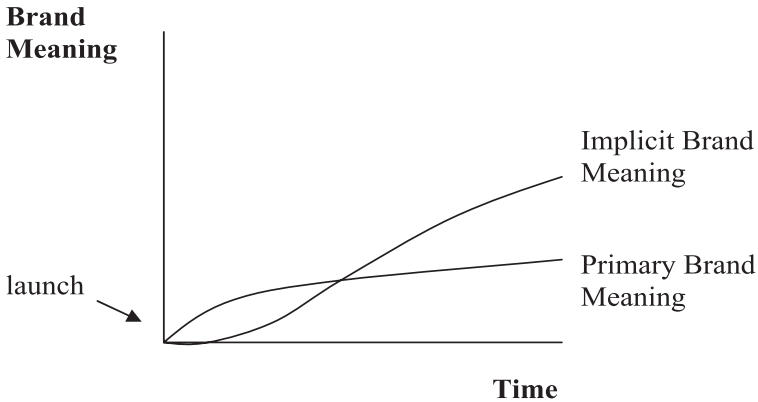
The Evolution of Brand Meaning

Brands start off as labels on products and end up as icons of meaning.

Goodyear (1996, p. 113)

Introduction

When a company launches a product, that product will have a number of distinguishing features. It will have a name, a logo, a physical format, distinctive packaging, a certain taste, maybe special design features and so forth. Yet at the beginning these elements lack meaning for consumers. Though they are elements that will contribute to the brand meaning, at the outset they—and by extension the brand—have no real meaning. From a meaning perspective, the brand still does not exist. As consumers become acquainted with and gain experience of the product—purchasing it, using it, discussing it with friends, seeing advertising for it—the primary brand meaning begins to form. More gradually and with the further passage of time, the abstract and symbolic properties of the brand begin to percolate through—qualities that are often provided by consumers themselves. Implicit brand meaning begins to evolve. Though primary brand meaning is likely to remain fairly consistent once it forms, implicit brand meaning, assuming the brand is given depth by manufacturer and consumer alike, will outpace the development of primary brand meaning once the symbolic properties begin to take hold. A potential scenario for the evolution of brand meaning (depending on the brand in question) is illustrated in Figure 7.1.
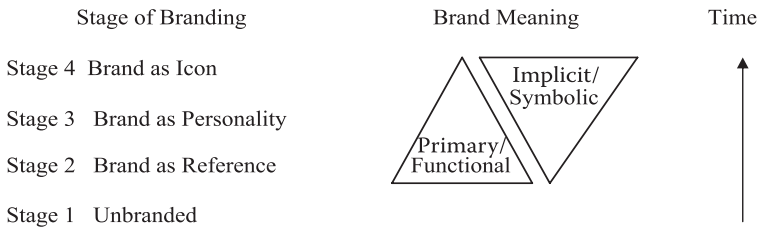
Figure 7.1   Example of evolution of brand meaning.

From Unbranded Good to Brand as Icon

So what stages does the development of brand meaning pass through? The transition from production-led to consumer-driven economies in today's developed countries has brought with it a change in the role and nature of brands. What were once commodities now compete in highly branded, competitive categories. Not so many years ago products such as milk, sugar and eggs were sold unpackaged as commodity items. As competitive market economies develop and with them the need for product differentiation, so brands become more prevalent and instrumental. Essentially, the progression has been from products being perceived as bundles of utilities to brands existing in consumers' minds as clusters of meaning. A useful model has been developed to illustrate how the nature of branding, and of brands, evolves over time (Goodyear 1996). An adaptation of the model is shown in Figure 7.2.

- Stage 1—unbranded goods: In this stage goods are treated as commodities and manufacturers do not attempt or need to differentiate their products. Demand usually exceeds supply. It is a scenario most characteristic of developing economies, though extremely low-interest products in developed economies would also fall under this group.

Stage of Branding	Brand Meaning	Time

Stage 4 Brand as Icon

Stage 3 Brand as Personality

Stage 2 Brand as Reference

Stage 1 Unbranded

Figure 7.2   Brand evolution model.

- Stage 2—brand as reference: As competition increases manufacturers are obliged to differentiate their products, which they do primarily along functional lines, identifying their utilitarian benefits with a distinctive name. The name is thus used for identification and as a guarantee of quality and consistency.
- Stage 3—brand as personality: As it becomes increasingly difficult to gain competitive advantage through product performance, manufacturers start to build emotional appeal into their brands, endowing them with personalities of their own and fleshing them out in advertising. A closer affinity starts to develop between consumer and brand, with the consumer becoming an active participant in the relationship and the molding of the brand's meaning.
- Stage 4—brand as icon: With time and consistency some brands become meaningful symbols to large groups of people. They become iconic brands. Icons are beacons of meaning within a society. Responding to dynamic motivational drives like loving, winning, or searching, iconic brands tap into the higher-order values of a society, in some cases the global society. Brands can become symbols of freedom or symbols of individuality or rebelliousness or masculinity. By the time this stage is reached, where the brand has come to represent something bigger than itself and its meaning is predominantly symbolic, the brand has effectively become decoupled from the product life cycle as traditionally defined.

Figure 7.3 provides an illustration of the model as applied to the U.S. bar soap market:*

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* McEnally and de Chernatony (1999) built on the study by Goodyear and proposed a six-stage model of brand evolution, adding a fifth stage of "brand as company" (IKEA is given as an example) and a sixth stage of "brand as policy" (with the Body Shop as an example).

Stage of Branding	Brand	Brand	Brand	Brand	Brand
Icon		Dove ↑			
Personality				Ivory ↑	
Reference			Dial		Irish Spring
Unbranded	Bags of soap sold on price				

Figure 7.3   Example of branding over time in U.S. soap market.

- Bags of soap entered at the unbranded stage and never progressed, the soap being sold on price and as a commodity.
- Dove entered at the reference stage and is steadily evolving into an iconic brand.
- Ivory entered as an unbranded product and has progressed from stage one to stage three.
- Dial and Irish Spring entered at the reference stage and have not progressed.

The model can apply at a macroeconomic level, for example comparing developed economies with developing economies. In the latter case fewer brands are likely to have reached Stage 4, whereas in the case of developed economies a smaller percentage of goods will be unbranded. Or the model can be used to compare one category with another as well as to assess the brand evolution within an individual category as in the aforementioned example. Categories that are more mature and that are composed of high-involvement products, such as cars and banks, will have a larger proportion of their brands at Stages 3 and 4, as consumers will have closer relationships with these brands. So-called low-involvement categories, on the other hand, are likely to have the majority of their brands at Stage 2, with some reaching Stage 3 and only a few, if any, at Stage 4, given that consumers are less likely to invest low-interest products with iconic significance. It should be noted, though, that, even if a category is deemed

low involvement today, there is no reason why it must remain so in the future (see the toilet tissue example that follows).

It follows that a category may contain examples of different types of branding at the same time as the brands in the category occupy different stages of evolution. It is not to say, however, that each brand is destined or intended for the next stage up. Depending on corporate objectives, category dynamics and so forth, brands may have reached their apex at Stage 2 or 3 and their managers may be happy to let them settle there. It is even feasible for a brand to fall back to a lower category in the event that the brand is neglected over time and does not receive promotional support. It will gradually lose its consumer franchise and eventually will be reduced, for instance, to brand as reference rather than brand as personality.

By the same token, a brand does not necessarily have to pass through one stage to attain the next level up. New brands can enter the category at any branding stage provided that existing brands in the category have laid a sufficient foundation of consumer understanding and accessibility to facilitate rapid adoption of the new brand. If a category contains symbolic brands a new brand may enter directly at this level if management has the money and vision to establish the brand at a symbolic level. On the other hand, a new brand in a category where its predecessors are brands as reference is unlikely to enter as brand as icon, given the comprehension gap between the two levels and the lack of intermediary consumer priming.

These factors also determine how long it will take for a category to move from being commodity centered to embracing brands as personality, for instance, or how long it takes for a brand to reach symbolic status. Some 70 years ago most British households used ordinary paper, often newspaper, in the bathroom. Today the toilet tissue market is highly competitive and big brands like Andrex and Kleenex are supported with large advertising budgets. Coca-Cola was invented in 1886 by Dr. John Pemberton, an Atlanta pharmacist who mixed the concoction in a three-legged brass kettle in his back yard. Pemberton's bookkeeper, Frank Robinson, came up with the name and scripted it into its famous flowing letters. It was first sold to the public at a soda fountain at Jacob's Pharmacy in Atlanta in May of the same year. One hundred years later Coca-Cola had evolved through brand as reference and brand as personality to become the biggest absolute and symbolic brand in the world.

One of the most remarkable transitions from commodity market to branded market was that of bottled water in the U.K. Given the backdrop of recessionary times in the early 1970s and the fact that ordinary tap water was free and safe to drink, the prospects of a French company's persuading skeptical Brits to pay a pound for a bottle of fizzy water did not look good. An advertising campaign by Perrier in 1974 was dismissed in a *Financial Times* article as a waste of time, claiming that bottled waters would be drunk only by cranks and foreigners. Sales of bottled water totaled 3 million liters in 1976. In just one decade that figure rose to 128 million liters. Perrier went on to spearhead a 600 million pound market, thriving on its award-winning "eau" campaign, which made the brand synonymous with bottled water and French wit. Today, Perrier competes with brands like Evian and Vittel.

Perrier was able to leapfrog the insignificant few brands as reference that existed at the time less because of the precedent established by those brands and more due to the conceptual proximity of bottled water with the overall soft drinks category. Market researchers were never quite sure whether to include the burgeoning bottled water market in their measurement of the soft drinks market or treat it as a separate market. Of course, consumers think less in terms of categories than they do in terms of needs and wants. The measurement criterion of the Coca-Cola Company, "share of throat," captures this graphically and accurately. If on average we have about eight drinks a day, what matters is how many of these are water, Coke, coffee and so forth. Incidentally, given the primal associations of water as the source of life—things, including us, grow and thrive with it and wither and die without it—and its cleansing and purification properties, it is surprising that no brand has managed to extend into the potentially highly symbolic territory that lies beyond the usual clichéd imagery of mountains and springs.

Other recent examples of success in branding what were once considered commodities are Chiquita bananas, Sunkist oranges and the California Milk Processor Board, with its "Got milk" campaign. The no-calorie sweetener NutraSweet turned a commodity into a brand when it made aspartame a household name in the early 1980s. The brand's success persuaded food and beverage manufacturers to use the sweetener in their products, to the extent that, 6 years after it was introduced, NutraSweet was being used in 3,000 different products. This impressive feat was achieved through a strategy of "ingredient

branding," where a product, invariably starting life as a commodity, is promoted to the end user in a bid to encourage him or her to look for and even demand the use of the hero ingredient in the host product. At one time computer chips were a commodity item in computer manufacturing. There was no perceived difference in performance among different chips among either consumers or computer manufacturers. With their ubiquitous "Intel inside" campaign, Intel built a brand from what was regarded as a commodity.

If evolving from unbranded commodity to brand as reference, personality, or icon can add millions of dollars to a brand's value, moving in the opposite direction, toward commodity status, has the opposite effect. One of the best examples of a company's rescuing its brand from the brink of commoditization is the turnaround performed by Gillette in the razor market. The 1970s was a period of great product innovation from the company. In 1971 they had introduced Track II, the first twin-blade razor with two parallel blade edges housed in a single, disposable cartridge. Performance was improved in 1977 with the launch of Atra, which featured a pivoting head. Toward the end of the 1970s Bic introduced disposable razors and Gillette found itself embroiled in a tussle for the disposable razor segment. Although Gillette responded with the first disposable twin-bladed razor, Good News, the ensuing battle was anything but. By the mid 1980s disposable razors accounted for fully half of the market. Disposables were dragging razors into a commodity market, where added value had no place and the purchase decision was based purely on price and convenience.

Gillette's next move was a masterstroke. In 1990, after abandoning advertising for its disposables the previous year and following 10 years and $200 million of research and development, the company introduced its Sensor twin-blade shaving system. With blades mounted on springs that enabled the razor to adjust to the contours of the face, Sensor delivered a demonstrably superior shave. Together with the "Gillette. The best a man can get" campaign, supported to the tune of $175 million, the new product extricated Gillette from the disposables quagmire and reestablished its innovation-driven leadership position. It also reversed the market's headlong flight to commoditization and, with the subsequent introduction of Sensor-Excel and Mach 3 (launched in 1998 on the back of a $750 million development budget), endowed the brand with an unassailable mixture of leading-edge technology and global symbolic values.

The commoditization of branded products may come about when a branded patent or technology becomes readily available to other manufacturers and the brand is not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of competition. Drugs that lose their patents are an example. When formulations become widely available, generic versions appear on the market. The product becomes a commodity and can no longer command a premium. The Office of Generic Drugs has estimated that between 2003 and 2010 branded drugs worth more than $20 billion in annual sales will lose patent protection. Similarly, the easy duplication of manufacturing processes and lack of enforcement of copyright protection mean that in countries like China, India and Mexico thousands of products can be produced that are perfect imitations of the European and American-made originals.

The branding level at which a given brand finds itself both determines and is determined by the meaning it has for consumers and therefore their relationship with the brand. In the case of a new brand the functional aspects will be assimilated quite quickly, but it takes rather longer for the more subtle, emotive properties of a brand to evolve. It is easier to win the consumer's head than his or her heart. As mentioned, this process is helped or hindered according to the amount of groundwork undertaken by brands already existing in the category. The meaning to consumers of brands as reference will be very functional, based largely on rational and utilitarian considerations. As managers build a distinctive brand personality, through advertising for example, the brand exerts more of an emotional appeal on consumers. Gradually, the brand's symbolic values evolve and the brand becomes important for what it symbolizes. What are the implications for brand meaning over time—both primary brand meaning and implicit brand meaning—as a brand develops in this way?

From the Category into the Culture

Brands that become truly iconic share certain characteristics. They evoke distinct experiences and feelings in people. They come to represent ideals and deep-seated convictions. They are connected to a

culture and a set of values. They may stand for a sense of justice and equality. Or they may embody a spirit of adventure or discovery. These are the types of values discussed in Chapter 2.

Some of the earliest cultural icons were religious, whose iconicity was embellished through storytelling, reference in sacred documents and appearance in holy places. The inexorable development of mass media vehicles—from the early days of print through the golden era of film and broadcast television—and today's phenomenon of instant online information sharing have had a profound impact on the emergence and circulation of cultural icons. This, together with ever more sophisticated marketing by the cultural industries, means that cultural icons can surge into the public consciousness more rapidly and more extensively than ever. Today's new gadget, or newly elected politician, or character in a film release, or sought-after tourist destination may all become tomorrow's cultural icon. The same is true for brands, which may transcend the product categories from which they emerge to attain the status of cultural icon in relatively short measure, if they can become compelling symbols for a set of values or ideals that resonate within a society or culture.

Though iconic brands often capture the mood of the time, what determines the longevity of their iconic standing is the ability to remain contemporary and relevant as time passes. The counterculture Volkswagen Beetle of the late 60s has morphed into the Volkswagen New Beetle in the early 21st century. But brand iconicity is not a one-way ticket and even Volkswagen slipped back into dormant hibernation, at least in the U.S. market. In his book *How Brands Become Icons,* Douglas Holt (2004) points out how Volkswagen's Beetle had become, by 1970, one of the most influential iconic brands in the United States by embodying the bohemian and art world myth of the late sixties era. Yet from 1972 to 1994 Volkswagen lost its iconic value as it failed to respond appropriately to the "cultural disruption" (i.e., socioeconomic or ideological ground shifts) of that period. From the mid 1990s onward Volkswagen managed to rekindle its iconic strength by reinterpreting its original myth in the context of the new sociocultural challenges of the day and embracing the indie myth as the cornerstone of Volkswagen's updated brand narrative (ibid., pp. 129–130).

In similar vein, Holt (2004, pp. 96–124) reviews the ebbing and flowing of Budweiser's iconic value in the U.S. market through

the years. Throughout the 1980s Budweiser climbed steadily to iconic stature on the back of its artisan myth. With its "This Bud's for you" campaign, Budweiser lauded and celebrated the men-of-action heroic blue collar workers who, through their selfless dedication to their craft and skilled manual labor, were gradually ensuring America's economic comeback. By the late 1980s and early 1990s economic realities had changed. Recession was followed by a largely jobless recovery and Budweiser's heroic artisan myth had lost traction. The brand floundered with an uninspiring mix of insipid Americana until around 1997 when Bud's myth was radically reinvented and aligned with the emerging slacker myth, pioneered by brands such as Mountain Dew. The slacker myth[*] was a more cynical, yet affirmative, worldview that poked fun at those who sold themselves and toiled blindly for the corporate dream and instead posited that hanging out with good friends was the route to happiness.

What these examples illustrate is that when a brand's implicit brand meaning—part of which is culturally determined—becomes sufficiently compelling for enough people it can stand shoulder to shoulder with other cultural icons of the period. Yet all too often brand managers fail to understand the nature of that implicit brand meaning and let a golden opportunity slip through their hands as the brand is dragged back into the mire of market share battles, category conflicts, promotional frenzies and price wars. Take care of the meaning and the market share will take care of itself. When Levi's started losing market share in the late 1990s, the trend was generally considered to reflect the company's gradual failure to transcend its products and category and become a free-standing meaning. Yet Levi's had been an iconic U.S. brand in the 1970s, just as Coke was—and just as Volkswagen and Marlboro had been in the 1960s and Nike, Budweiser and Absolut would be in the 1980s. Maintaining iconic status is not easy, as brands such as Levi's, Pepsi and Cadillac have recently shown.

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[*] Holt (2004, p. 41) draws a useful distinction between what he calls affirmative myths and myths of resistance. The former endorse prevailing ideology while the latter challenge it. Budweiser's "This Bud's For You" campaign is an example of an affirmative myth, whereas Volkswagen's counterculture Beetle of the 1960s was founded on a myth of resistance.

Brand Communities

Iconic brands form visceral, profound connections with their consumers. Those consumers may have different ages, backgrounds, gender, ethnicities and creeds, but they are drawn together as an extended family through their affinity to a brand. Behind every iconic brand is a committed brand community. Sometimes these brand communities actively organize themselves, as in the case of Harley-Davidson. In other cases they form a looser, more passive association of like-thinking people who share an enthusiasm for a brand. Think Apple, Volkswagen, Starbucks, or Virgin. The term *brand community* refers to "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of community: (1) shared consciousness; (2) rituals and traditions; and (3) a sense of moral responsibility. Shared consciousness arises when "members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection to one another" (ibid., p. 418). Rituals and traditions "represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community…. (These) typically center on shared consumption experiences with the brand" (ibid., p. 421). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) give the example of Saab owners acknowledging each other on the road by honking or flashing their headlights.

Harley-Davidson: An Icon of Meaning*

When people tattoo a brand symbol on their skin it is, quite literally, a graphic illustration of the meaning that brand has in their lives. The famous Harley-Davidson "bar and shield" is the most popular tattoo in the United States. Besides those aficionados proudly sporting the ink, the brand is imprinted on the consciousness of hundreds of thousands more. If truly iconic brands are about standing for something bigger than themselves, then few would surpass the iconic status of Harley-Davidson. In fact Harley has become such a cultural icon that, to understand the brand, it is first necessary to understand the complex

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* For this case study I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Ross Stuart Fuglsang of Iowa Morningside College and his excellent work *Motorcycle Menace: Media Genres and the Construction of a Deviant Culture* (dissertation, 1997).

sociocultural background that is so much a part of the brand's heritage and meaning.

Although the first Harley-Davidson rolled out of the Milwaukee machine shop run by William Harley and Bill and Walter Davidson in 1903, it was during the late 1940s and 1950s that America's motorcycle culture began to make itself felt in the public conscious. Postwar America was a world of middle-class comfort and conformity on the one hand and increasingly restless youth on the other. The growing youth culture that idolized James Dean, Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley had trouble identifying with what they saw as the blandness of middle-class mainstream. To disaffected and unsettled young men, motorcycling and the culture surrounding it provided excitement and adventure. It also afforded some sense of camaraderie and belonging, as riders came together to form clubs.

Of the nearly 6 million motorcycle owners in the nation today, about 60 percent are between the ages of 37 and 64. Many of these enthusiasts trace their early impressions of bikers and motorcycle culture back to the 1954 classic *The Wild One*. The film, hallmarked with Brando's particular embodiment of virile masculinity, set the precedent for a generation of biker films to come. *The Wild One* was based on Frank Rooney's *Cyclists' Raid,* which in turn owed its plot to a real incident in 1947 when a mob of motorcyclists indulged in a weekend of violence and revelry in the town of Hollister, California. As if the damage done to the biker image by Hollister was not bad enough, the 1950s saw the emergence of the most notorious biker club, the Hell's Angels, who would also eventually become tarnished through violence and organized crime.

The year 1969 saw the release of the iconic *Easy Rider*. The film depicts a search for freedom in a corrupt and conformist America, following the fortunes of its two biker antiheroes, played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. *Easy Rider* equates motorbikes with the freedom of the open road, adventure and exploration rather than with delinquent and criminal behavior. Although they are involved in drugs, the bikers are presented as harmless outlaws rather than criminals. They exist outside society's norms and conventions. The names of the two main characters, Wyatt and Billy, call to mind the controversial desert lawman and adventurer Wyatt Earp and legendary outlaw Billy the Kid. Indeed, commentators have observed the similarities between the biker film genre and that of westerns. The underlying theme of westerns is "a conflict on the border between two lands or two eras, with a hero divided between the two value systems" (Fulsang 1997, p. 143, paraphrasing Cawelti 1969). Biker films borrow from this idiom. Moreover, they often take place on borders that are both literal and figurative. The Southern

California setting of many biker films places them near a national border as well as the border between civilization and the desert.

Events such as those that took place in Hollister damaged the image of the motorcycle and its devotees. Harley-Davidson tried to disassociate itself from the unsavory aspect of outlaw bikers, but it was not easy and ran counter to business sense at a time when the company was depending on many of these hard-core enthusiasts for its very financial survival. In the early 1960s Japanese motorcycles began to make inroads into the market and in 1968, to evade a hostile takeover, Harley-Davidson was sold to American Machine & Foundry. Despite having its back to the wall, the company gradually began its remarkable recovery. In the face of fierce Japanese competition, Harley-Davidson struggled on as the last bastion of the American motorcycle industry. This served to instill a tremendous sense of pride and patriotism in the brand. In 1981 a group of Harley executives and stockholders bought the company and it was soon back in the black. In 1986 it felt confident enough to support the removal of tariffs on Japanese bikes and it has since gone from strength to strength.

The company's resurgence brought with it a renaissance in the biker myth—albeit a sanitized version that has now been absorbed into the mainstream. The Harley-Davidson company of the 1990s through to today has preferred to accentuate freedom and individual expression with a hint of nonconformity rather than the rebellion of its outlaw roots. Yet the changes of the past 30 years or so have not completely extinguished the biker outlaw image. It is an image that Harley-Davidson would not want to see completely overhauled, as, in truth, it has always been an integral part of its heritage and mystique. The Harley-Davidson myth is inextricably bound with the biker myth. The appeal of the outlaw biker fantasy, rooted in antiestablishment and nonconformity, still holds sway over law-abiding establishment members not immune to the urge to escape, however briefly, the constraints of modern life. From the rich and colorful antecedents just outlined come the Harley values of the 21st century:

Freedom
Adventure
Individuality
Patriotism

Harley owns the category essence. It is synonymous with the freedom of the open road, the ability to break loose and the thrill and exhilaration of the wind in your face. The personal freedom that the brand represents includes freedom from confinement—both "the freedom of

the saddle" (as opposed to the automobile) and from four walls—and freedom from mainstream values and social structures (Aaker 1996, p. 138). The macho ruggedness that is part of the brand's personality is equally appealing to the not inconsiderable number of female riders as it is to the wide spectrum of male devotees.

Harley-Davidson exemplifies many of the ways brands become the repositories of vital meaning. It is a case study that illustrates many of the key themes of this book. Harley delivers a very potent mixture of emotional, expressive and experiential benefits. It makes its users feel like the people they want to be and helps them play out their fantasies. It gives them a sense of identity and makes them feel connected with others in their brand community whose values they share. It is the ultimate experiential brand. Harley riders will tell you that there is nothing quite like the look, feel and sound of a Harley—800 pounds of gleaming steel with its trademark styling and a throaty roar as distinctive as a human voice. As any Harley enthusiast will tell you, only a Harley sounds like a Harley.

Even nonowners and nonbikers are drawn to the brand's mystique, as witnessed by the huge volume of officially licensed Harley merchandise the company sells. Wearing a Harley T-shirt or a bomber jacket emblazoned with the bar and shield is one way of drawing meaning from the brand. In terms of the meaning transfer model, as the fashion and media worlds steadily disseminated the outlaw biker story, the biker myth became attached to the Harley brand. Today 45-year-old white-collar professionals and office workers appropriate this meaning when they buy and ride a Harley bike.

There is much ritual surrounding Harley machines, including the customization of bikes and the ceremonial trappings on show at Harley rallies—with their profusion of black leather, weaponry, heavy boots, big beards and ubiquitous tattoos. These rallies are the ultimate manifestation of the Harley brand community. It is a community the company is very careful to nurture—through plant tours, special events, rallies and races. The Harley Owners Group (HOG) unites more than 800,000 members worldwide, organized into well over 1,000 chapters, making it the largest factory-sponsored motorcycle organization in the world. Harley-Davidson takes the concept of extended family very seriously. Says the company's Web site, "Here's the bottom line: We like to think of Harley-Davidson—from the top corporate officer to the newest Harley owner and rider—as one big, happy family" (http://www.harley-davidson.com). This is more than facile marketing speak. Company executives and dealers sponsor HOG activities and ride alongside members at rallies, creating a special bond between organization and
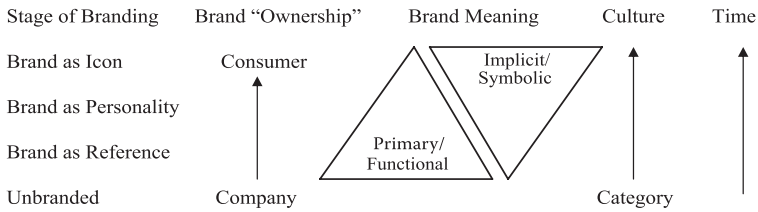
customer and affording Harley executives and engineers invaluable feedback and learning.

Few brands have managed to generate the kind of deep visceral connection and unswerving loyalty that Harley has. While the HOG refers to ownership of a Harley machine, the name is also an appropriate metaphor for the group of people who own not just the product but the brand itself: the consumers. As with all iconic brands, Harley executives would happily admit that it is they, the devoted consumers, who own the Harley brand—not the company. It is a state of affairs that has taken many years to come about. Harley-Davidson is the very antithesis of the dotcoms that wasted millions in the late 90s trying to buy brand status overnight with frivolous advertising campaigns. The brand has achieved its iconic status through consistency at every touch point with its consumers. Not many brands have the benefit of more than 100 years of history behind them, but that counts for nothing without a cohesive brand message across advertising, product development, distribution channels, customer service and licensing activity.

In the way that only vigorous brands can, Harley generates a compelling brand narrative. As Jon Howard-Spink (2003, p. 16) writes, "We are at our most loyal when buying the story of the brand … and the opportunity to become part of that story." Blurring the lines between classic brand community and subculture, the Harley brand invokes an enduring myth, situates its adherents in an aspirational and inspirational context and provides them with a vocabulary, code of conduct and a way of life: "Live to ride, ride to live."

As iconic brands develop in the way just described, consistent with the brand evolution model, there are, then, two important dynamics to their evolution that are worth underlining. The first is that these brands break out of their category and into the culture. The meaning and importance they hold for consumers come to reside less in their category context and more in their sociocultural context. Again, the example of the Volkswagen Beetle is a case in point. Brands that become culturally pervasive offer their consumers a vocabulary— both literal and metaphorical, a brand narrative of which they can be a part and an enduring way of life. Buying into a way of life that is provided by an iconic brand is very different from simply buying so-called lifestyle brands. The relationship between consumer and brand in the latter case is far more superficial. These are little more than badge brands, which are soon discarded in favor of the next fad. Brands that make the transition from category players to cultural icons are liberated from comparison with competing brands from

Stage of Branding	Brand "Ownership"	Brand Meaning	Culture	Time
Brand as Icon	Consumer	Implicit/Symbolic		
Brand as Personality				
Brand as Reference		Primary/Functional		
Unbranded	Company		Category	

Figure 7.4   Brand evolution model: from category to culture.

the category and instead come to represent more meaningful satisfaction and fulfillment in peoples' lives. Nike makes great sports shoes, but Nike's cultural brand significance (and implicit brand meaning) is that it gives people a sense of accomplishment and makes them feel good about themselves through sport and physical exercise.

The second dynamic of brand evolution from brand as reference to brand as icon is that the brand's center of gravity gradually shifts from manufacturer to consumer. By the time the brand has evolved from category to culture, its passage into consumer ownership is complete. These two dynamics are illustrated in the enhanced brand evolution model shown in Figure 7.4.

Evolution and Consistency

To survive, brands must evolve and sometimes diversify. This does not have to be at the expense of consistency and continuity, but it often is. Brand extension, realignment, cobranding—all can have a direct effect on brand meaning by transplanting a brand from one context to a completely different one or juxtaposing it with a semantically different brand. The ideal brand is one where there is a seamless fusion between product values and brand values and where this unity can be maintained in the long run. Of course, this does not mean that the product or brand cannot undergo change any more than it implies that new advertising campaigns cannot be developed to replace existing ones. Product innovation allows brands to reinforce what they stand for and to contemporize brand meaning. Keeping the brand's values relevant and in line with consumer priorities will necessitate occasional innovation. But that innovation should be evolutionary and consonant with brand meaning. For example, from a business perspective Starbucks, with its huge prime site presence,

can easily generate incremental revenue by selling carbonated drinks and sandwiches or can engage in joint promotions. For a long time the company resisted the temptation and instead sought to evolve the brand by mining its brand meaning and by exploring what else coffee can be besides hot and liquid. Just recently, more and more of its outlets are selling other food products, leaving the way open for new specialist contenders to encroach on Starbuck's coffee territory.

Above all, once resonant symbolic meaning begins to emerge for the brand, it should be treated as the precious property it is. Implicit brand meaning should be nurtured and preserved over time, even if primary brand meaning is modified in the interim to keep pace with, or ahead of, the market. Unilever's Persil brand in the United Kingdom, mentioned earlier, began life as a soap powder and remained so for some time, even after much of the market had moved into synthetic detergents. Its slogan from the 1920s to the 1970s was the simple but memorable "Persil washes whiter." Today the brand encompasses a wide range of variants, including the highly successful tablets and has extended into dishwashing liquid. The primary brand meaning has thus evolved significantly; at a technical level the brand today bears little resemblance to that of the 1960s, yet, through all the format and formulation changes, the brand's implicit meaning remained intimately linked to a mother's pride and care for her family.

As a brand develops from brand as reference through brand as personality to brand as icon, its brand meaning footprint will expand. This is inevitable given the passage of time, product innovation and brand extension, successive advertising campaigns and so forth. Indeed, such activities are essential ways of amplifying brand meaning. Brand meaning is embellished when it finds cumulative resonance among consumers. The greater complexity that this gives the brand should make it more robustly meaningful. However, the danger is that complexity becomes confusion and incoherence. A brand-meaning footprint that is expanding is one thing; a brand-meaning footprint that is dispersing is quite another. Trying to be all things to all people has led to the downfall of many a brand. Complexity can and has to be accommodated but should never eclipse the importance of standing for something distinctive and motivating.